

Exploring Werribee Gorge 1836–2010

compiled by Judy Douglas and Bob Reid

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Exploring Werribee Gorge 1836 - 2010 is the latest in a series of books published by the Friends of Werribee Gorge and Long Forest Mallee Inc over several years. Previous books detail the natural history of various sites in the Bacchus Marsh area in which the group has an active interest. This latest book documents the history of human interaction with the Werribee Gorge. It demonstrates that the Gorge's unique geological features were recognised in the earliest days of European settlement in Victoria.

Using primary sources that document the history of human interaction with this fascinating place, combined with photographs taken over 160 years, the book demonstrates both the public and official interest in the Gorge since the early days. These documents include reports from government departments, newspaper articles, hand-drawn maps, reviews, letters, early black and white photographs and naturalists' reports. The black and white format of the book reflects the nature of these documents and material. Bob Reid's distinctive drawings of plants and wildlife effectively complement the style of the book.

The book documents a long association of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria with the Werribee Gorge. There have been regular visits by the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria to the Gorge since at least the 1890s, reports of which have appeared in *The Victorian Naturalist* for over a hundred years. It also describes the long involvement of noted naturalists such as AJ Campbell and JA Leach with the Gorge.

Local newspaper articles describe Dr JA Leach, and others, leading parties of 500-700 students on educational excursions into the Gorge, as early as 1906. This would be a daunting exercise in these days of universal vehicle ownership, let alone in the days when cars were a rarity and travel was invariably by train.

Excursion notes reveal that there existed a different approach to bird-watching in these pioneering days. One report states: 'the number



of birds identified was exactly 50 species, nests and eggs being taken of 19' (page 18). A similar statement nowadays would horrify most bird-watchers.

Despite early recognition that the Gorge was worthy of protection, the book details the slow and tortuous process by which a reserve was created. A letter to local newspaper *The Express* on 15 April 1939 reflects local frustration on lack of progress in creating a reserve at Werribee Gorge:

There is a story that a parrot was sent from Mildura to Benalla... On arrival in Melbourne the bird was found to be dead and an unusually efficient officer wrote on the address card "Bird dead". On arrival at Benalla another official not to be outdone added: 'Bird still dead. Has a similar fate befallen the Gorges?' (page 142)

The region to the west of Melbourne and its fascinating natural history have long been neglected by the wider community. 'Nothing but weeds and Brown Wedges' are commonly expressed perceptions. This series of books by the Friends group plays an important role in promoting interest in the natural history of this region, especially in a climate of rapid expansion of the urban growth boundaries of Melbourne's west. Their latest book details not only the history of the Werribee Gorge, but also gives an insight into the history of the Bacchus Marsh region.

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